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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000304

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CURRICULUM REFORM RANKLES IN JORDAN

REF: AMMAN 062

Classified By: Ambassador Edward Gnehm for reason 1.5d

SUMMARY

1. (C) A recent Ministry of Education (MoEd) announcement of plans to incorporate human rights concepts in school curriculum unleashed a media frenzy in opposition to the perceived imposition of western standards. While the status of the changes remains unclear, GOJ statements and the timing of both USG calls for education reform and other Arab regimes' plans for curriculum changes have only solidified opposition to the reforms. GOJ statements that this was a domestic, UNESCO-supported project and its efforts to explain its plans have neither resolved the debate nor inspired confidence in the government's intentions, even by supporters, though the King visited the MoEd yesterday to show support for its strategy. The Israeli Embassy and press have also objected to one module which encourages contrast of terrorism and resistance to occupation (we will seek clarification on this point). With the debate cast in nationalist, Islamic, and anti-Israeli terms, the opposition is prevailing over demoralized reformists, who lament the new government may be failing an early test of its capacity to implement its reform agenda. End summary.

THE REFORMS

2. (U) At the end of December the MoEd announced a UNESCO-supported curriculum reform program which aims to incorporate into textbooks and syllabi human rights concepts such as the freedom to live in peace and of religion, public assembly, travel and self-determination. According to the MoEd, these concepts have roots in Islamic teachings and the Arab-Islamic heritage and are to be introduced over the next few years. Forced by the resulting media frenzy to defend the reform publicly, Education Minister Khalid Touqan met with parliament's Education Committee and has repeatedly discussed the government's plans with the press. Touqan confirmed that the concepts do not contradict Islam, Arab tradition, the constitution, or current educational guidelines. He explained that they are intended to be gradually integrated as part of ongoing domestic curriculum development in history, civic education, Islam, and Arabic and English language course work.

3. (C) The Prime Minister's human rights advisor, Nancy Bakir, and MoEd head of training, Ahmad Ayasreh (a recent International Visitor program returnee), have confirmed to emboffs that the proposed concepts are just that--no specific language has been drafted, and no textual changes have been ordered. However, specific text has been widely reported and commented on in the media. Hence, the specifics of the reforms remain confusing for most Jordanians.

MEDIA FRENZY AND POLITICAL REACTION

4. (U) Spurred by recent USG calls for educational reform at a conference in Alexandria and announcements from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia that those governments were also reforming their curricula, the press and political opposition went into a feeding frenzy following the government's announcement. Headlines such as "Developing the curricula or Zionizing them?" (al-Wihda) and "America declares war on educational syllabi" (al-Sabeel) appeared (ref), and the IAF issued a forceful statement expressing its rejection of outside influences on Jordanian education. Many in the public consequently view the reforms as the result of a U.S./Zionist plot to impose non-Arab and non-Islamic standards on unsuspecting children. MoEd and government spokesperson denials have failed to convince skeptics. On Jan. 12 the King visited the Ministry to show his support for its 5 year education strategy, though press reports carried no specific mention of the curriculum reform. The public nature and timing of the visit did, however, provide veiled support for the reform.

ISRAELIS UPSET, TOO

5. (C) Another controversy involves the content of the reforms. On December 30, Fawwaz Jaradat, Director of the

Curricula Department in the Ministry was quoted as saying "we will try to make our students more aware of the very great difference between terror and legitimate resistance." Minister Touqan noted publicly that 9th and 10th grade curricula will contain ideas to stimulate discussion of resistance to occupation and terrorism. The Israeli press reported on the proposed change. The Israeli ambassador described the apparent change to the Ambassador as a step backwards and a possible violation of the Jordan-Israel peace treaty.

FALLOUT

16. (C) The GOJ's handling of the issue has only made matters worse. Even supporters lament the missed opportunity to discuss the issue more calmly and rationally and fear that the government's recent actions may jeopardize this chance to modernize the curriculum. Newly appointed Senator Mai Abu Samen told PolCouns January 8 that she was very disappointed with the government's -- and particularly Minister Touqan's -- handling of the issue. Even as a member of the Senate's Education Committee, she complained, she has not been able to get from the MoEd a clear explanation of the principles to be introduced into the curriculum, or even whether the Ministry has drafted specific textual changes. Abu Samen, a long-time women's activist and former school teacher, described herself as a "natural supporter" of what she thinks the Ministry is trying to do, but admitted that the "lack of transparency and public debate" in the curriculum changes has hurt her confidence in the MoEd.

17. (C) A group of liberal Jordanians made similar laments to the DCM, noting that the voting down of curriculum reforms by the Kuwaiti parliament had encouraged foes of reform in Jordan. Islamists had successfully seized control of the debate here; once the contest was cast in terms of defeating external, anti-Islamic, pro-Israeli imports in the curriculum, few reformists were prepared to speak out (these liberal reformers betrayed some of their own biases and detachment from the public by arguing for a return to use of the British-inspired textbooks of their youth in the 1940s and 1950s, replete with Keynesianism and readings from "David Copperfield").

COMMENT

18. (C) The whole controversy appears to be a spontaneous combustion between and within the press, parliament and government foes, who are testing the new government's tolerance, but know they cannot take on harder issues, such as the Jordan-Israel or Jordan-U.S. relationship. This is an early test of the sincerity of the Fayez cabinet's commitment to reform, and capacity to achieve it. So far, its performance has only caused confusion and alienated all interested constituencies and parties. If the government pushes forward with reforms, it will lose popularity and hand a weapon to the opposition; if it shelves the changes, it will suffer a blow to its reformist credentials. The government's own statements have needlessly stirred up discussion of the issue of terrorism versus resistance, a debate which will be of no service to Jordan, domestically or abroad.

GNEHM